
Birding in the Usambara Mountains, Tanzania

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Containing ten species of birds currently classified as threatened, one critically so, and a further three as near-threatened¹, the Usambara mountains of Tanzania are one of the most important African mainland sites for the conservation of birds. In spite of this they remain firmly off the beaten birding track, possibly due to the belief, true in many cases, that Tanzanian montane areas are difficult to access and devoid of amenities. I visited the Usambaras in January 1996 and, using public transport throughout my trip, found that many of the best sites are easily accessible and in most cases less than eight hours drive from the capital, Dar-es-Salaam. The Usambaras are also easy to reach from Kenya and a visit could easily be incorporated into a Kenya trip. The fact that the area can easily be visited using public transport, both from within Tanzania as well as from Kenya, is an added bonus to those on a tight budget, or those without their own transport.

This article is therefore directed at those visiting birders who plan to see as many of the speciality birds of the area as they can in the shortest possible time. To this end, I have only concentrated on a handful of sites which combine easy access with the potential to see some of the rarest and most enigmatic birds in Africa.

Large areas of the Usambaras remain little known, and there is still a great deal of scope for those with the time and inclination to explore them, as recent notable discoveries in the East Usambaras testify. The main problem is that the natural forest habitat of both the East and West Usambara ranges continues to diminish.

The Usambaras are divided into the East and West ranges by the Lwengera valley. Both possess their own specialities and therefore both should be visited. As regards when to go, it would probably be prudent to avoid the long rainy season, which in Tanzania runs from March to May, as road conditions deteriorate. The short rains in northern Tanzania are in November and December but rain can fall at any time in the mountains and visitors should pack waterproofs just in case.

The West Usambaras

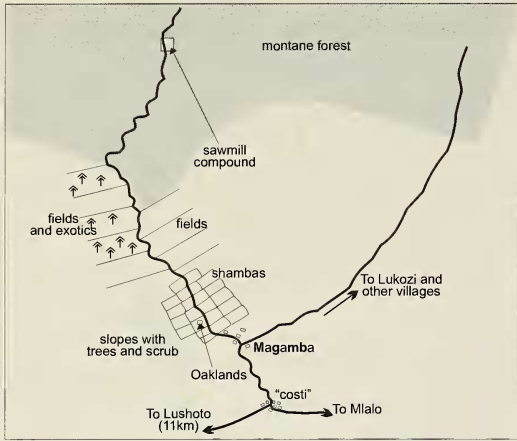
This range has now been extensively deforested in favour of cultivation and exotic plantations which are largely devoid of birds. The few remaining areas of natural forest are concentrated at higher elevations

with only a couple of isolated pockets elsewhere. Human population pressure here is severe and what is left of the natural forest is continually being whittled away by those desperate for land to cultivate.

The main town in the West Usambaras is Lushoto, which is easily reached by road. From Dar-es-Salaam, take the main Moshi and Arusha road via Korogwe to the small town of Mombo, situated at the base of the mountains. From here a paved road leads uphill to Lushoto. Roads continuing into the mountains from Lushoto are all dirt but nevertheless driveable. Lushoto can be reached by bus from Dar-es-Salaam, Tanga and Kenya. From Dar-es-Salaam several daily buses leave from Mnaji Mmoja park starting at c0800 hr. The journey to Lushoto takes eight hours, from Tanga the service is even more regular and takes four hours. From Nairobi there is a regular bus service to Moshi and Arusha via Namanga on the border. From either town there are regular buses to Dar-es-Salaam which can be utilised to get to Mombo which is en route. There are many buses to Lushoto and beyond from Mombo. In Lushoto accommodation is available in the rather overpriced Lawns Hotel. There are a number of other guesthouses in Lushoto, such as the Kimonyu near the market, which are adequate and cheap. Birdlife is limited around Lushoto, although **Red-chested Cuckoo** *Cuculus solitarius*, **Klaas's Cuckoo** *Chrysococcyx klaas*, **Emerald Cuckoo** *C. cupreus* and **Eastern Double-collared Sunbird** *Nectarinia mediocris* are often evident around the larger gardens. It is also worth checking some of the rocky hillsides between Mombo and Lushoto for the very local **Striped Pipit** *Anthus lineiventris*.

Magamba and the Sawmill track

This is the most accessible major site in the West Usambaras. From Lushoto take the dirt road leading uphill to Mlalo for c10 km to a T-junction at a group of stores and houses locally known as Costi. Turn left here, following a sign to Oaklands and continue for c1.5 km to another junction at Magamba. Here turn left, again following the sign for Oaklands onto the dirt road to the sawmill. There is a bus service linking many of the West Usambara villages with Lushoto and buses leave the latter for Magamba and beyond in the afternoons. It is easier to just start walking from Lushoto until someone stops and offers a lift, usually in an unofficial bush taxi. Once on the Sawmill track, the



Map of Magamba area and the Sawmill track

scrub-covered and partially forested slopes left of the track and beyond Oaklands hold **Fülleborn's Black Boubou** *Laniarius fülleborni*, **Black-fronted Bush-Shrike** *Malaconotus nigrifrons*, **Spot-throat** *Modulatrix stictigula* and **White-starred Robin** *Pogonocichla stellata*. **African Wood Owl** *Strix woodfordii* can be found at night around Magamba. From the village, the Sawmill track winds uphill, firstly through cultivation and plantations before entering an extensive area of montane forest leading to the sawmill at c2,000 m. Fortunately, the sawmill appears to be only processing exotic trees. It is c7 km from Magamba to the sawmill and this is driveable in a saloon car. It is worth spending as much time as possible birding in the forest leading to the sawmill. Several major specialties occur here, including the rare **Usambara Weaver** *Plocceus olivaceiceps nicolli*, **Usambara Akalat** *Sheppardia montana* and **Red-capped Forest Warbler** *Orthotomus metopias*. The **weaver** can appear anywhere within the natural forest, preferring the low canopy and mid-level. As in other parts of its restricted range, it is present only in very small numbers and may require a long search. The **akalat** can also be difficult. It is most often seen in the forest immediately below the sawmill at c1,950 m. **Red-capped Forest-Warbler** is common, usually in thick roadside vegetation. Both **Evergreen Forest-Warbler** *Bradypterus mariae* and **Cinnamon Bracken Warbler** *B. cinnaomeus* also occur in such habitat and can be frustratingly difficult to see. Another skulker here is **Spot-throat**, which creeps mouse-like along the forest floor. A host of other interesting species can be found here: **Mountain Buzzard** *Buteo oreophilus*, **African Goshawk** *Accipter tachiro*, **Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo** *Cercococcyx montanus*, **Lemon Dove** *Columba*

larvata, **Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon** *C. delagorguei*, **Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater** *Merops oreobates*, **Silvery-cheeked Hornbill** *Ceratogymna brevis* and **Hartlaub's Turaco** *Tauraco hartlaubi*. Mixed-species flocks are worth searching for and can include: **Olive Woodpecker** *Dendropicos griseocephalus*, **'Mombasa' Woodpecker** *Campethera abingoni mombassica*, **Grey Cuckoo-Srike** *Coracina caesia*, **Bar-throated Apalis** *Apalis thoracica*, **Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler** *Phylloscopus ruficapilla*, **White-tailed Crested Fly-catcher** *Elminia albonotatus*, **Olive Sunbird** *Nectarinia olivacea* and **Forest Batis** *Batis mixta*. A plethora of **greenbuls** is usually in attendance within mixed-species flocks and are fortunately all relatively distinctive. The black-browed Usambara subspecies of **Eastern Mountain Greenbul** *Andropadus nigriceps* should be seen, together with **Stripe-cheeked** *A. milanjensis*, **Yellow-streaked** *Phyllastrephus flavostriatus*, **Shelley's** *A. masukuensis* and **Tiny Greenbuls** *P. debilis*, the latter of the montane race *albigula*. **African Hill Babbler** *Pseudocalcippe abyssinica* also occur in the forest understorey. Both **Waller's Starling** *Onychognathus walleri* and **Kenrick's Starling** *Poeoptera kenricki* occur alongside each other and **Sharpe's Starling** *Cinnyricinclus sharpii* can usually be found in trees bordering the sawmill compound. There are a few trails which lead into the forest interior, these are well worth exploring for **Spot-throat** and **Usambara Akalat**. I would recommend at least three days to adequately cover this site.

Mazumbai Forest Reserve

For those with more time to spare, I would also recommend a visit to Mazumbai. This is a magnificent area of undisturbed and pristine montane forest with an altitudinal range of 1,300 m to 1,900 m. There is also excellent accommodation available in a beautiful mock Swiss chalet and camping is permitted in the grounds, which are very near the forest. To stay in the guesthouse write in advance to: Mr Modest Mrecha, Mazumbai F.R., P O Box 152, Soni, Tanzania. You must bring your own food but no advance booking is required to camp. Modest runs the guesthouse and guards the forest on behalf of the Sokoine University of Agriculture. A number of interesting birds have been recorded at Mazumbai, most notably **Usambara Eagle Owl** *Bubo (poensis) vosseleri*, **Usambara Weaver**, **Usambara Akalat** and **Banded Green Sunbird** *Anthreptes rubritorques*. All are rare here but there is a fine selection of other montane species.

Getting to Mazumbai is easy for those with their own transport. Drive the short distance from Lushoto

to the small town of Soni, which is on the Mombo road, and turn onto a broad dirt road, before turning right onto another dirt road leading to Bumbuli, 25 km away. Mazumbai is signposted from Bumbuli and is 15 km along a scenic mountain road. Buses are frequent between Lushoto and Soni but infrequent from the latter to Bumbuli, although traffic is regular on this route and arranging a lift is usually straightforward. The final 15 km to the reserve is a long hike.

Mazumbai is an impressive place with huge trees echoing to the sound of hornbills. Birding is either from the main track through the reserve to the guesthouse or from a number of trails leading into the forest and accessing different altitudes. For the latter it is advisable to employ a guide. From the main track a number of interesting species can be found including **Crowned Eagle** *Stephanoaetus coronatus*, **Bar-tailed Trogon** *Apaloderma vittatum* and **Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo**, the latter usually detected by its loud and evocative whistle emanating from the canopy. This species is extremely hard to see without resorting to tape playback. Two other skulkers occurring here are **Spot-throat** and **White-chested Alethe** *Alethe fulleborni*, both of which are relatively common and should be seen with a little effort, principally around dawn and dusk. At lower elevations look for the diminutive **Sharpe's Akalat** *Sheppardia sharpei*, yet another undergrowth specialist. A bizarre mammal, the **Black-and-rufous Elephant Shrew** *Rhynchocyon cernei petersi* has occurred here and is also worth searching for.

There are several other sites in the West Usambaras which would repay a visit but which take time to reach and possess no amenities, eg the summit of Shagayn at 2,200 m possesses significant numbers of **Usambara Akalats**. For those intending to visit the more out-of-the-way places English-speaking guides can be hired at the Green Valley restaurant, near Lushoto market.

The East Usambaras

Population pressure on remaining habitat in the East Usambaras is lower than in the western range. There are consequently larger areas of forest which also reach lower altitudes, resulting in a broader range of bird species.

Amani is the main town in the East Usambaras and is an ideal base as many of the area's specialities can be found nearby. To reach Amani from Dar-es-Salaam, take the main road north to Tanga as far as Muheza, where the Amani road branches off left. This dirt road starts to climb beyond the village of Bombani, which is the only major settlement en route, and is passable with care in a saloon car. Amani is c160 km

from Lushoto via Mombo, Korogwe and Muheza. By bus from Dar-es-Salaam, take one of the many Tanga-bound vehicles early in the morning, alighting at Muheza. The daily bus from here to Amani leaves the marketplace at approximately lunchtime when full. Try to be on the bus by 12.00 hr; it usually arrives in Amani by 16.00 hr. The daily bus leaves Amani on the return journey at c0700 hr and is usually less crowded. By bus from Lushoto, take one of the several Tanga-bound buses which leave from the market area each morning at c07.30 hr. The Tanga buses also pass through Magamba at c07.00 hr and can be hailed from the roadside. These buses reach Muheza in time to catch the Amani bus.

Amani-Sigi Botanical Gardens

Soon after leaving Bombani village en route to Amani the road enters lowland forest, shortly after which it crosses over the river Sigi. The roadside forest in the area of the botanical gardens at c500 m is worth birding, and a track running alongside the river through forest to the right and scrub on the left is also worth a look. This joins the road just beyond the bridge. The rather uncommon **Half-collared Kingfisher** *Alcedo semitorquata* can sometimes be seen in this area. Many of the birds of this area will be familiar to birders who have visited Kenya's Sokoke forest; birds such as **Fischer's Turaco** *Tauraco fischeri*, **Silvery-cheeked** and **Trumpeter Hornbills** *Ceratogymna bucinator*, and **Green Barbet** *Stactolaema olivaceum*. The birds of the mixed-species flocks also mirror this similarity – look for **Scaly-throated Honeyguide** *Indicator variegatus*, **Yellowbill** *Ceuthmochares aereus*, **Drongo** *Dicrurus adsimilis*, **Square-tailed Drongo** *D. ludwigii*, **Retz's Helmet-Shrike** *Prionops retzii*, **Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrike** *P. scopifrons*, **Crested Flycatcher** *Trochocercus cyanomelas*, **Little Yellow Flycatcher** *Erythrocerus holochlorus* and **Dark-backed Weaver** *Ploceus bicolor*. Parties of sunbirds may include the rare **Amani Sunbird** *Anthreptes pallidigaster* and **Plain-backed Sunbird** *A. reichenowi*. On the forest floor look for noisy parties of **Pale-breasted Illadopsis** *Illadopsis rufipennis* and the occasional **Red-tailed Ant-Thrush** *Neocossyphus rufus*. Loud liquid calls and nasal gratings from the canopy usually betray the presence of the magnificent **Green-headed Oriole** *Oriolus chlorocephalus*, a species which is surprisingly common here. Keep an eye skyward for **Crowned Eagle** or even **Ayres Hawk Eagle** *Hieraaetus dubius* which has been recorded here. Look out also for **Bat-like Spinetail** *Neafrapus boehmi* and the longer-tailed **Mottled-throated Spinetail** *Telacanthura ussleri*.

From Amani-Sigi the road snakes uphill towards Amani through some interesting forest blocks. It is worthwhile stopping occasionally, especially where trails lead into the forest.

Amani

Amani is a pretty, almost alpine, village situated amongst lush forested hills and tea estates at c900 m. The forest here takes on a submontane character and contains an interesting mix of lowland and montane bird species. Accommodation, including full board, is available at excellent prices at the IUCN guesthouse. To pre-book write to: IUCN, P O Box 1, Amani, Tanga, Tanzania. Camping is permitted in the grounds and there is another guesthouse at Amani run by Malaria Research.

The grounds and forest borders around the IUCN guesthouse are perhaps the best site for the rare **Banded Green Sunbird**, a Tanzanian endemic which is scarce elsewhere in its restricted range. Here, it can be seen without problem, usually high in the trees and often in company with **Collared Sunbird** *Anthreptes collaris* and the local **Uluguru Violet-backed Sunbird** *A. neglectus*. The adjacent Amani Botanical Gardens are also good for **sunbirds**, as well as **Green-headed Oriole**, **Green Pigeon** *Treron calva*, **White-eared Barbet** *Stactolaema leucotis*, **Black-breasted Glossy** *Lamportornis corruscus* and **Kenrick's Starlings**, and **Paradise Terpsiphone** *viridis* and the local **Black-and-white Flycatchers** *Bias musicus*. **Red-faced Crimsonwings** *Cryptospiza reichenovii* haunt the pathways and undergrowth.

A trail leads from the IUCN guesthouse into an excellent forest reserve and it is well worth spending some time here, especially in the early morning and late afternoon. Mixed-species flocks contain a variety of **greenbuls**, including **Tiny** (of the nominate lowland subspecies) and **Cabanis's Greenbuls** *Phyllastrephus cabanisi*, both **drongos**, **White-eared** and **Green Barbets**, **Scaly-throated Honeyguide**, **Grey Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Black-headed Apalis** *Apalis melanocephala*, **White-tailed Crested** and **Paradise Flycatchers**, **East Coast Batis** *Batis soror*, and the possibility of both **Moustached Green** *Pogoniulus leucomystax* and **Green Tinkerbirds** *P. simplex*, here meeting at their lower and upper altitudinal ranges respectively. Look along the forest edge for **Pallid Honeyguide** *Indicator meliphilus*, possibly in company with groups of **Green Barbets**. Listen for the incredibly loud *brrrrup* of the **African Broadbill** *Smithornis capensis*, principally early and late in the day. A number of shy ground-dwellers can also be found here, notably **White-chested Alethe**, **Sharpe's**

Akalat and **Dappled Mountain-Robin** *Arcanator orostruthus*, although connecting with the latter species requires time, effort and luck. **Brownbul** *Phyllastrephus terrestris* also occurs, often in thicker undergrowth found in small tree-fall clearings, betraying their presence by harsh chattering calls. **Orange Ground-Thrush** *Zoothera gurneyi* is another possibility here.

When the forest interior becomes quiet mid-morning it is worth following the path upward to the Mbomole viewpoint. At 1,050 m, this offers an excellent vantage point over the forest canopy and is a good spot to observe forest raptors. **African Goshawk**, **Crowned** and **Southern Banded Snake-Eagles** *Circaetus fasciolatus* are all likely, the latter species often heard calling in a series of guttural barks. **Little Sparrowhawk** *Accipter minullus* has been recorded roosting in nearby trees and a dawn or dusk visit could, with luck, produce an **Olive Ibis** *Bostrychia olivacea* flying to or from its roost, or even **Usambara Eagle Owl**.

A very rare and recently described nocturnal mammal, the **Mountain Dwarf Galago** *Galagoides orinus* occurs in this forest reserve. It is a diminutive species, as befits its name, best identified by call, a high-pitched twittering which recalls the alarm call of a Blackbird *Turdus merula* in structure, although it is higher in tone. Look also for the much larger **Greater Galago** *Otolemur garnetti* which call frequently with a high-pitched bark. This species and also **African Wood Owl** often enter the gardens around the IUCN guesthouse after dark.

The Monga Road

Signposted from Amani, this driveable road first leads through a forested section of the Amani Botanical Gardens before continuing past a swampy area on the left. Strips of forest run alongside the road for c4 km before giving way to cultivation. After a short distance the shambas in turn give way to a large area of tea plantations and forest fragments.

The first few km of this road can be especially productive. Listen for the weird, eerie moan of the **Buff-spotted Flufftail** *Sarothrura elegans* from the swampy area left of the road at dawn and dusk. **African Moustached Warblers** *Melocichla mentalis* skulk in the thick waterside vegetation and the dainty **Mountain Wagtail** *Motacilla clara* can usually be found alongside forested streams. The strips of roadside forest often contain mixed-species flocks, often surprisingly late in the morning or early in the afternoon when other forest areas have become very quiet. The species involved are similar to those found

in the nearby forest reserve, but also include **Little Greenbul** *Andropadus virens*, **Black Cuckoo-Shrike** *Campephaga flava* and **Amani Sunbird**, here at the upper limit of its altitudinal range. The critically endangered **Long-billed Tailorbird** *Orthotomus moreaui*, which is actually related to the Asian tailorbirds, also occurs here but is very rare and elusive. Along roadside verges watch for **Green-backed Twinspot** *Mandingoa nitidula*, which can be surprisingly hard to see despite their bright plumage. Overhead **Southern Banded Snake-eater**, **Wahlberg's Eagle** *Aquila wahlbergi* and **Long-crested Eagle** *Lophaetus occipitalis* all occur.

Of the tea estates situated further along the Monga road, the Karimjee Tea Estate is worthy of mention. An enlightened owner policy has resulted in the preservation of small areas of forest alongside the Kwamkoro river, which is the only regular site for **Long-billed Tailorbird**. The local **Kretschmar's Longbill** *Macrosphenus kretschmeri* also occurs here and **Half-collared Kingfisher** can be found along the river. Permission must be obtained prior to visiting this site – enquire at IUCN, Amani or the estate itself. Another species worth looking for, after dark, along the tea estate's dirt roads is the endemic *guttifer* subspecies of **Montane Nightjar** *Caprimulgus poliocephalus*, treated by some authorities as a species, the '**Usambara Nightjar**'.

Other sites in the East Usambaras

There remains a significant proportion of forest cover at all elevations in the eastern range, some of which is ornithologically unknown. There is, therefore, a great deal of scope for those with time to seek out new sites and add to our knowledge of the area's avifauna. I will briefly mention several areas where recent expeditions^{4,5,6} have produced some notable discoveries, although it must be remembered that these areas are difficult to access, lacking in amenities and require considerable planning to visit.

Several lowland forest reserves lie to the north of Amani, the best of these being the Kwangumi-Segoma, Kambai and Marimba reserves. **Usambara Eagle Owl** and **Sokoke Scops Owl** *Otus irenae* have been found to be frequent in both the former two areas, whilst **Swynnerton's Robin** *Swynnertonia swynnertonii* and **East Coast Akalat** *Sheppardia gunningi* are common in all these reserves⁵. The village of Kambai, c30 km north of Amani, could be used as a base to explore these areas. North of Kambai lies Mt. Nilo, another recently explored area of submontane forest where **Usambara Weaver** has been found². **Spot-throat** and **Red-capped Forest**

Warbler also occur here⁶. **Long-billed Tailorbird** has been recorded in degraded land near Mt. Nilo³. I would advise those planning to visit these sites to contact BirdLife International for up-to-date information and see Evans *et al* (this issue).

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